

## **Digital Learning Advisory Council**

Meeting Minutes

*August 10, 2020*

### **Attendees**

- Katie Bauer — Trinity College
- Nick Caruso — CABE
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- Kevin Corcoran — Connecticut State Colleges and Libraries
- Jonathan Costa — EdAdvance
- Larry Covino — Bristol Adult Education
- Andy DePalma — EASTCONN
- Josh Elliott — Fairfield University
- Karen Kaplan — Hamden Public Schools
- Shannon Marimón - ReadyCT
- Greg Mcverry — Southern Connecticut State University
- Jim Spafford — Manchester Adult Education
- Chinma Uche — CREC Aerospace Academy – CT CS Teachers Association

### **Agenda**

- Everyone Learns Initiative
  - Devices and Connectivity for K – 12
  - Public Hotspots
- Open Education Resources
  - Go Open CT Platform
  - Implementation
- “How We Feel” Applications

## **Welcome**

Nick Caruso, Chair of the Digital Learning Advisory Council, welcomed the members and convened the meeting at 10:00 AM. He then turned the meeting over to Doug, who provided a brief overview of the agenda items.

## **Everybody Learns Initiative**

Doug welcomed the members and noted that the Advisory Council and Commission have long raised the issue of digital equity and developed guidance, programs, and other resources to address the digital divide. He shared the exciting news of the Governor's Everybody Learns Initiative (ELI). This program, funded through federal CARES Act dollars, provides Internet and devices for public school students as well as public wireless access points through libraries across the state. The [announcement and press conference](#) July 28 provided details about the team working to plan and support the program, including Nick Simmons and other members of Governor Lamont's office, Commission member Ajit Gopalakrishnan of the State Department of Education (SDE), Commission member Burt Cohen of the Office of Consumer Counsel, leaders from the Department of Economic and Community Development, Ryan Kocsondy of the Connecticut Education Network (CEN), CEN co-founder and Internet2 vice president Rob Vietzke, and Doug.

### *Devices and Connectivity for K – 12*

The program provides devices and Internet connections to students who do not have them so that they can participate along with their connected peers in remote and blended learning. District responses to surveys from the Commission in April and SDE in May have helped to quantify the gap between digital haves and have-nots. Doug provided the group with a brief overview of how the initiative would address this gap. First, districts provide an updated estimate of students needing a computer and access to the Internet. For connectivity, school leaders indicate their total need for cable broadband (preferred) or cellular hotspot connections. Following a review of these requests, the ELI team will work with districts, computer resellers, and broadband carriers to ensure that needy students receive devices and connections.

The Advisory Council members welcomed the news and offered a few suggestions. First, several asked about supports for families in using the new devices and Internet access. Greg Mcverry encouraged partnerships with local nonprofits to assist parents in making the best use of technology for their students. He specifically noted the challenge of parenting during COVID-19, having to balance remote and home schooling with work obligations. This topic led to a discussion around social and emotional learning (SEL). In addition to normal supports for students and staff, the stress that many learners and educators face has led schools to provide additional supports. Karen Kaplan noted Hamden's summer program for students in special education students and support for staff who have fears of returning to the classroom and becoming infected with the Coronavirus. Doug suggested that the group contribute digital literacy and SEL resources to a shared spreadsheet that we would create.

Both Larry Covino and Jim Spafford, representing the adult education community, noted programs that tie training and digital literacy skills to receiving computers and Internet access. Jonathan Costa mentioned a similar approach through EdAdvance's early literacy program, wherein parents must complete a four-hour training program in order to receive an iPad. Dawn LaValle reminded Advisory Council members of the significant role that public libraries play in teaching digital literacy skills, both through formal classes and informal training.

Nick welcomed the news around devices and connectivity but expressed concern around parallel efforts to address the digital divide. He noted the recent investment by the Dalio Foundation into the buildout of a wireless network across Hartford as possibly overlapping with the free connections for students paid for by the State. Doug agreed but assured Nick that discussions were ongoing between the Dalio Foundation and State leaders to align efforts and avoid redundancies. Doug also spoke to high-level plans to address the sustainability of these efforts through outreach to federal lawmakers to allow E-rate to fund home connections and to explore ongoing state funding.

#### *Public Hotspots*

To provide open Internet connections in communities throughout the state, the ELI program also allots more than \$2M to create public wireless access points. As the lead partner in this aspect of the initiative, CEN will install more than 200 access points at libraries to allow for walk-up and drive-up access to the Internet for learners of all ages.

#### *General Connectivity*

In addition to providing devices and connections to students as well as public access points, the initiative includes an awareness and outreach campaign. Targeted at Connecticut citizens who have inadequate or no access to the Internet, the campaign will call attention to the benefits of being online, including the ability to access telehealth and employment resources, state services, and continuing education providers, among others. Through a variety of media outreach channels, the campaign will provide citizens with information about free access (e.g., via local libraries) as well as connecting via the local carriers serving their region.

#### **Open Education Resources**

Doug provided a brief update on progress to support the use of free and open education resources. He noted last year's rollout of the Go Open CT Web site ([www.GoOpenCT.org](http://www.GoOpenCT.org)), with curated resources, professional development opportunities, and templates for adoption at the district level. The Commission received funding for a Web-based repository through an award in April through the Public, Educational and Governmental Programming and Educational Technology Investment Account (PEGPETIA) program as well as the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, in partnership with the Connecticut State Department of Education, in July. The platform will enable the creation and sharing of digital learning materials at the classroom, school, district, state, or global level. He pointed out that high-quality and standards-aligned lesson plans, unit plans, flipped videos, and

even assessments exist now within district-level collections. The repository would provide a means of creating, indexing, sharing, and searching for these resources, based on district leadership permissions, across the state. Greg welcomed the news and underscored the importance of having adequate professional development, especially around copyright and licensing. Doug concurred and noted that a steering committee will convene soon to help plan the platform design and rollout, along with training resources.

### **“How We Feel” Applications**

Related to the earlier topic of SEL supports, Doug introduced the possible use of a mobile app to provide insights into the impact of COVID-19 on educational communities. He began by providing background on “How We Feel,” the app [endorsed by Governor Lamont in an April 20 announcement](#). Those who download and use the app respond to questions through daily check-ins on a variety of topics: how the individual is feeling overall that day, whether they have left their home, protections they have taken to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus, whether anyone in their household has or may have COVID-19, and how they would rate their levels of stress, anxiety, gratefulness, and other indicators of emotional well-being. The app provides users with longitudinal insights on their activities and well-being. At an aggregate level, How We Feel provides insights into collective behaviors — e.g., the self-reported likelihood to practice social distancing, by day — using anonymous user data.

Following a screen share of the app's input screens, the Advisory Council members discussed possible uses of How We Feel and questions about data use. Andy raised questions about the use of personally identifiable data through the app. He also asked about schools' obligations to take action if students or parents submitting information through the app indicated that they faced an imminent danger or risk. Districts face similar questions when they use anonymous tip lines and software that flags the occurrence of key words in online software platforms. Doug clarified that How We Feel is only available for use by adults, those 18 or older, though the developers could at some point develop a version for minors.

Karen noted that the app would need to have a language preference to accommodate for non-English speakers. She also expressed concern about equal access to the app, given that not all families have smart phones. Greg agreed, noting the highest response rates to surveys and other feedback instruments come through text messaging. Larry thought the use of daily check-ins would benefit his district, and Nick agreed that the app held promise as long as district leaders could access the aggregated responses for decision-making.

### **Adjournment**

Nick thanked the members for their time and input and encouraged Advisory Council members to continue bringing topics of concern and opportunity to the Commission. He concluded the meeting at approximately 11:30 AM.